

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a tower. This tower was not all that distinguishable from most of the other towers, mind you. In this land, there was a city, therefore the tower was much like any other; white like ivory, imposing like an elephant, and controlled by beings who hoard gold like dragons.

To the east of a city, there was a village on the coast. In that village there was a young girl named Ali. Ali came from a family who highly valued education and who sent Ali to the best tutors in the kingdom, even when they could hardly afford them, to ensure she would have more opportunities than they did. When Ali was young, she amazed her tutors with her quick, beautiful script and keen ear for important details. Ali was told she would do well for herself if she became a scribe.

Ali was proud of her skills, and was determined to prove to her family, and to herself, that she had what it took to thrive in the world. When she came of age, she applied to the university to apprentice as a scribe. She was very good at remembering and transcribing exactly what was said and done, and when it was said and done. The university was an especially exciting place for a young scribe to test their skills; as people from near and far flowed through the streets and buildings. Ali was careful to identify and tuck away important information while listening to the master scribes at the university, such as meanings of foreign words, or the particularities of political changes or adjusted tax law.

Soon, Ali met other scribes and orators, those who were always in the market square adjacent to the university, sharing poetry and news from abroad. A statue stood at the center of the square, a mighty stone elephant painted in royal purple. A symbol of the people, of the intelligence and long tradition of memory-keepers and wisdom-sharers. She was fascinated by the orators' ability to transform their written words to affect the gathering crowds. When she was alone, she practiced writing her own speeches and poetry about anything from the latest fight over the price of wheat to the beauty of the sunrise.

Ali joined the group in the market square sometimes, and was pleasantly surprised to find that people liked what she wrote and said. Surely not as much as the older, wiser, more charismatic folks...but she was good. She held promise. Once, after a particularly thrilling moment when she received thunderous applause after her debate with a fellow scribe, an elderly scribe pulled her aside underneath the shadow of the elephant's trunk.

"Any scribe and orator worth their salt keeps one of these in their pocket. I think you are ready for its weight."

The elder reached inside her hijab and pulled out a small replica of the purple elephant. She offered the tiny statue to Ali.

“Remember, child.”

“Remember what?”

“Oh, you’ll figure it out.” [cackles]

Ali, of course, accepted the gift, but kept the elephant in her pocket rather than her hijab. One day, near the end of her term at the university, the master scribe who supervised her apprenticeship told Ali that the head of a prestigious foundation was in town. He asked Ali transcribe the meeting.

The master scribe was effused with his excitement about the upcoming meeting. “The Matsuo Foundation has long supported various research efforts at the university. They are trying to change the world!”

Ali was familiar with the Matsuo Foundation. In fact, a number of her fellow apprentices were eager to apply for work after graduation. Matsuo was a powerful yet benevolent god, who had grown rich in offerings for thousands of years. It was rumored that his interest in human affairs, and vices, were cultivated with his past as the patron god of rice wine. Alcohol, after all, was the center of many human civilizations. It was also rumored that anyone who made an offering directly to Matsuo in his office at the top of the tower, was destined to change the world.

Ali agreed to sit in on the meeting. She was determined to impress and take full advantage of this opportunity.

The foundation head was a gentleman from the city, a tall and imposing man with a smile that seemed as sweet as the rice wine he supplied as a gift to his hosts. The meeting went well, Ali thought, until the head turned to her.

“May I?” the man asked, gesturing to her neatly organized notes.

“Of course.”

“Hmm. You listen well.”

“Indeed she does!” the master scribe crowed. “That’s why we are the best and straightest scribes in the kingdom. You can see why clients trust us.”

“Trust is invaluable, certainly. That’s a vanishingly rare gift. Would you like to work for me?”

“Oh, see here, Ali is invaluable, as you say. She is only halfway through her apprenticeship! I could hardly part with her!”

Ali did not like being bargained over like some pound of meat or cask of wine. But to work in the city? Her family would be thrilled! And she would be able to make much more money there than stuck in her coastal village. She could learn so much more too. Imagine the market square in the city!

The head of the foundation, after pacifying the master scribe with the promise of a generous endowment in exchange, turned to Ali.

“Well, Ali? Would you like to help us change the world?”

Ali, of course, said yes. In seemingly no time at all, she was bidding a tearful farewell to her family and friends and packing up to the city. The foundation was willing to pay for her relocation. Her living quarters were modest, but adequate for sleeping and eating. She would be spending the majority of her time at the foundation after all.

The city was just as dazzling as she had hoped, and her first visit to the tower that housed the Matsuo Foundation was exhilarating. She had her own office. It, too, was modest and small, but it had a little view of the city. She had made it!

Ali got to work immediately, first shadowing and then attending meetings on her own. It was more demanding than her time at university, she soon realized. There were so many meetings. All of utmost importance, according to her supervisor and the head of the foundation. Meetings about world-shattering events. Meetings about what the world-shattering events actually meant in context to other events. Meetings about how to describe that context in a way that would make sense to the political actors at play. Meetings about what those political actors were saying, what the foundation wanted them to say, and when to say it. Meetings about what was actually said, what lessons were learned, and what to pat themselves on the back for.

The words and statistics cited at every meeting soon began to bleed together. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions. Dozens dead. Hundreds rioting in another kingdom far away. Thousands of pounds of gold stolen. Millions in search of shelter.

And the Matsuo Foundation in the middle of it all, completely determined to address every problem, certain of their collaborative, holistic solutions.

But that was the problem, Ali slowly began to realize. All her writing, all her transcribing...they were merely addresses.

But surely there was something changing, she assured herself day after mind numbingly long day. There were people at the foundation who cared, like her, about changing the world for the better. They were all there, after all. In that tower, wielding power and influence towards other people with power and influence. Words have power. Ali saw that in the market square, so why should she doubt it at the foundation?

Months passed, and just at the beginning of monsoon season, the head of the foundation called her into his office.

“My dear scribe, you have done such good work for us. I was hoping you would make time in your schedule for a new assignment. You see, one of our senior scribes has left the foundation and, well, his job was to register our monthly offerings to Matsuo. We need someone trustworthy to fill in. It would be a perfect growth opportunity! You’re a great team player, Ali. I knew I could rely on you.”

Ali was, admittedly, already swamped with her current workload. And the Matsuo Foundation didn’t pay overtime. But she assumed that this was just the way things worked around here. And, if the rumors were correct, this meant she was one step closer to meeting Matsuo in his office. Which meant she could be destined to change the world herself!

The additional transcribing cut into her already meager meal break, but she was finally able to see exactly what kinds of things, and people, Matsuo invited to his sacred, cloud-ringed, altar. They were usually indicators of the foundations impact on the world, a casket of rice wine from a newly connected politician, an academic who was recently acknowledged for her work in the sciences, or the peace wreath from the latest round of talks between quarreling nations.

The monsoon season was well underway, and Ali found herself sleeping at her desk most nights to both keep up with her workload and to avoid being caught in the downpour.

One particular evening, Ali was finishing up another report of Matsuo's gifts and visitors that week. The gifts and people were obviously marked with great importance...and yet Ali began to wonder why so many people were destined to change the world, and yet the ills of the world remained largely unchanged.

With a bang, the door to her office slammed open. The head of the foundation seemed quite calm in the face of such a violent entrance, but Ali noted a sheen of sweat on his brow.

"Ah! Ali, great you are still here. Listen, I need you to do me a favor. The president of the kingdom of...well, it doesn't really matter. Anyway, she has declined to send an offering, which is of immense offense, you see...and partially because I don't think I quite told her how important it is to be a part of such an elite circle of change-makers. And this was someone that Matsuo himself invited directly. She said something about bribery, but I mean. Unbelievable, right? But! I have something we can give in her place. Don't worry. He won't know the difference, just say it's from the President of, uh...shoot, what was it again? It's on the note on the casket. Anyway. Can you bring it up? I have a very important feast to attend and well, with the weather being what it is I need to be heading out now. I cannot be late for that. I'll just place it here, shall I? Wonderful. You're such a great team player, Ali! Good night!"

With that, her boss left the tower, and a casket of rare rice wine, behind in Ali's care.

He had told her to bring it up. Up only meant one thing in this tower. Matsuo.

Her office was at the bottom floor. She had many stairs to climb. But, perhaps, this was her chance. A chance made from a mistake perhaps, but a chance nonetheless. And she was going to take it!

Ali quickly scaled the first few flights of stairs with adrenaline pouring in her veins and carefully cradling the casket of wine in her arms. At about the tenth floor, her breathing began to labor. She was only a scribe after all, she didn't do much physical work outside her desk. By the thirtieth floor, Ali was trembling and slow. What was the height of the tower anyway? She was sure she read somewhere.

Fifty floors now. Even with her great memory, she couldn't recall in the midst of her effort to climb. Something purple flitted up the stairs in front of her. Small, but familiar. It seemed like...an elephant? Perhaps in her daze, she was hallucinating. But she remembered now. The tower was seventy stories tall. She was more than halfway up. With a thrill, the knowledgeable egged her on.

Finally, Ali saw the end. The end to her ascent. With one final push, she rushed to make it up the final steps and...the casket of rice wine, the gift for Matsuo, slipped from her hands and shattered on the threshold of Matsuo's office door.

"No. No, no no no no!" It was pointless, but Ali picked apart the glass as if to salvage it. The only piece unmarred was the paper, the note attached. She stuffed it into her pocket. What now? What could she possibly do now? Turn back?

The decision was made for her. The office door opened.

The office, or altar, perhaps, was dark. The room was lit only by flashes of lightning from the monsoon outside.

"Hello?" she called out. "Mr...uh...your greatness. Um. Sir. Matsuo-kami?"

"Who are you?"

"Um. I'm. Uh."

Ali fumbled for the note that had been attached to the now broken casket of wine. She could only see the script in flashes of lightning.

"I'm...President...May...Myeon. Sorry. *Myeong* of the Kingdom of—"

"President Myeong. A pleasure, I am so honored to have you at my tower. You are doing wonderful work. I'm certain the head of my foundation told you what makes this meeting all that more special, correct?"

"Yes. Yes. Of course."

"Destiny is such a powerful thing. The ability to change things, let alone the world. I am certainly impressed. This honor is mutual, you see. Ah, I smell makgeolli. From your kingdom, I presume? I was once there...long ago. I have a fondness."

“I’m...I’m sorry. I did not bring makgeolli.”

“What did you bring for me then?”

Ali rummaged through her pockets, and her hand brushed familiar stone. The elephant. Perhaps that would be good enough? No. No, she shouldn’t part with that. Should she? She was already pretending to be someone she wasn’t, for the chance to claim a destiny.

Her hand tightened around the statue. She could feel its tusks digging into her skin.

“No,” she told Matsuo, the god of this tower. “I do not. And I am not President Myeong. I am Ali. I am a scribe here.”

“So you lied to me.”

“I am very sorry. I was told...”

“You do what you’re told, then? What a lack of backbone. You work here, eh? Well, not for very much longer...”

“I was told to come here out of respect for you!” Ali was surprised by her own force of will. “It was a mistake! Do you really change things around here anyway?”

“Excuse me?”

“I am a scribe. I hear what the meetings are about. The gifts, too. They are all very nice, very inspiring. But that’s all that comes out of this tower! Words! They flow out easy as anything, but what does it actually change?”

“That’s enough.”

“No, it’s not.” Ali’s rage made her cling tighter to the statue in her hand.

A peel of thunder rolled over the tower. The lightning was closer now.

“Hahahahaha! I was wrong. You do have a bit of a backbone, I will give you that. How about a proposition, then? Since you arrived without an offering. I will give you your destiny. If you pass three tests.”

“Tests?”

“Yes. Three tests to see if you truly have the will to change things as a simple scribe. Pass them, and I will offer my blessing of the power of change to you. Not even kings have been given this opportunity! They just get my signature. No actual additional power, child. So even if you don’t think it does much, you cannot deny that there is more power here, at the top of this tower, than scribbling away mindlessly at the bottom. Unless you really think you can change anything down there?”

“And if I don’t pass?”

“Well, easy. You’re fired. With no power, no influence. Your destiny will be as mediocre as the rest.”

“I do have the will to change things. Words...they have power, too.”

“Ha! We shall see about that. Here, I’ll take it easy on you. You already passed the first test by climbing the tower and reading that slip of paper. If you want to change things in the real world, you have to actually do things in the real world. Not just your mind, understand?”

Ali frowned, but before she could ask a followup question, a wind rose up, a dry, hot wind, and suddenly Ali was in the middle of an explosion of sound. Screams, metal clashing, thundering of something that was both horses’s hooves and walls tumbling.

“GET DOWN!”

Ali flinched instinctively, and a missile of something large and fiery flew over her head.

She was in the middle of a warzone. The numbers and statistics she had read over and over flew out of her head all at once, and she ran for cover inside a building that wasn’t complete rubble. She came face-to-face with an exhausted troop of doctors treating moaning patients. Ash streaked their faces.

“We can’t stay here. They’re coming.”

“There is a neutral zone down east. The soldiers, they are headed west. We can take the alleys. You!”

“What?”

“You can write, yes? We need someone to describe what is happening here.”

“You want me to write while all of this is happening?”

“We need someone to tell our story. Please.”

A quill and a scroll was shoved into her hands and she numbly sat on the floor. The thunder of the fighting shook the building. What was the point? Even if she wrote what she saw, anyone who would read it would simply stash it away like she did, in the corner of her mind as faceless horrors and mindless numbers.

Something nudged her side. She looked over, and there was her tiny elephant. It was small, but it was alive, somehow. Perhaps she hadn't been hallucinating on the stairs.

Ali suddenly remembered a debate she once had with a senior scribe at the university. What was the point of memory? She had asked.

The point, he told her, was that someone will learn something from others mistakes. Not everyone, but perhaps just one person. Perhaps a single memory was easily forgotten, but all memories add up to a whole life.

Maybe this one memory, this one fight, would not change the world. But perhaps it could change one person. Just a little.

So Ali did what she did best, and focused all her might on writing what was happening around her. Despite the fear, despite the sounds, despite everything telling her to run.

The hot wind began to blow again, and suddenly she was at a feast. At the head of the table was a figure, robed in white, surrounded by people drinking glass after glass of sweet rice wine.

“Drink up, young one! It's a celebration!”

A glass of rice wine was shoved into her mouth, and she was forced to drink. The food, too, was passed around and seemed to make the world go hazy. She drifted from person to person, feeling like she knew some of them, but not entirely sure where from. Perhaps from home? No, no, that one was almost certainly identical to a portrait of a poet she once saw at a museum. Impossible, though, that poet—they lived hundreds of years ago!

The undead poet pushed another quill and scroll into her hands. "Write, dear heart. It's best while intoxicated, promise. Easy to feel the flow!"

Ali nearly toppled down into a seat of cushions. The indulgence was getting to her, she was beginning to drift to sleep.

A trumpet sounded in her ear and she startled awake. The elephant again. It was irritating. What was it trying to do, keep her awake to write some rambling nonsense while she was out of her mind?

The little trumpet sounded again. Ali heard a lecture once, about the history of bards, and the myth of the drunken court jester. They did not drink to make themselves write better, to tell the truth. They drank because they were afraid of the stories they would tell stone cold sober.

The world was much better numbed by wine. The war Ali just witnessed proved that. But what was the point in seeing the world in a flow state? Was it truly needed?

Ali breathed, and pushed away the bottle that was passed around from hand to hand. And she wrote what she remembered from that lecture. She wrote what she remembered from that visit to the museum, the story of a poet with a tragically short life. The paper seemed to drink in her fears, her confusion, and finally laid the ghost to rest.

A figure, robed in white, stood before her. Her scrolls were in his hand.

"It doesn't read all that well, to be honest. But I suppose it is good enough. Better than writing drunk, editing sober. Perhaps I should edit these drunk..."

"So...have I passed?"

"Yes! Congratulations. You certainly have the willpower to change the world, young Ali. But. I still need an appropriate offering. Hmm...that little elephant of yours will do."

"What? But...but that's what got me through all of this."

"Exactly! You don't need it anymore. It is just a trinket. You may be able to be a scribe in the midst of war, or exhaustion, or distraction...but it doesn't mean you can move the wheel of fate that way. You need more than just your will. That is the point. You need nurturing. You need a platform ripe for change. Don't you see? I can give you that platform! Or perhaps you would prefer to go back to writing at the bottom of a tower..."

“Are those really my only two choices?”

“I mean. Yeah. Obviously. Or I could just leave you here. In the middle of the desert. Burned out. Alone. But that’s not really a choice at all, is it?”

Ali looked at the little purple elephant by her side. None of the choices were appealing. But she earned her little purple elephant. She had the will. She proved it. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t what she wanted.

“I choose...neither. I quit.”

“You quit? I thought you wanted the power to change the world! What else could possibly compare...What could you want? To be an underpaid, overworked scribe, from some inconsequential little village? Hm? What do you desire, then?”

So what did I want, if I no longer wanted the power to change the world? Back at the university. No, not at the university. In the market square. There were actually people who wanted to talk to each other, debate each other, listen. Transform. Even just a little. I don’t want a platform. I want more places like that. The city doesn’t have a market square, do you know that? Not really. Your towers are all bricked up, and sanitized...shops and people inside desperately rented holes in the wall, behind doors and meeting rooms. Inaccessible. You don’t have anything there that’s open and alive like the market square in my inconsequential little village. And that place transformed me more than your stupid tower ever could! That was what I want. More of those markets, those public places filled with life. But I can’t find them in the towers. I know I can’t go back to my old market square either. Maybe I want something perhaps not yet known. But I won’t stay at your rotten foundation.”

Matsuo laughed, a booming, long laugh. For a moment, she thought he looked like he was impressed. But he simply disappeared without another word. The sun beat down, and Ali’s mouth began to dry out.

The desert dunes rolled between them as human and elephant walked. Eventually, the little purple elephant at her side was no longer little. It was the size of the statue in the market square. The elephant continued to walk towards the endless horizon. Ali did not know where she was being led, but she had to trust that the elephant knew the way.

Perhaps she was hallucinating again, but out of the endless golden sand flashed a dot of green. And then another. And another. Then, impossibly, blue. An oasis. Ali ran

towards the water, drank her fill. When she had enough, she looked up and saw more people there, also at the shore of the oasis. The tired and hungry. Refugees. Travelers. Just...people without a place to stay. To work. To live. To learn. To be.

Ali joined them, and they shared their stories. And she shared hers. They spoke of the hope of a different sort of life, and she spoke of her hope of a different sort of space.

The oasis was but a temporary reprieve. Some groups were headed west. Some east, and yet others north and south. They had to move on. To find different lives. Different spaces. Ali was invited to join any of them. She felt like she had too many choices, but one remained the same. She looked at her elephant, her pocket touchstone. The elephant was a reminder that there will always be something or someone to demand her energy and her choice and her action and her will. That was simply life.

The elephant was a reminder that what mattered most was not destiny, or platforms, or power. The elephant was a reminder that she could draw on the wisdom of her experiences and her desire to connect, to overcome obstacles, to direct her will, and inscribe a life that was truly her own.

The end.

—

Ali and the Tower is a modern audio folk tale written, produced and performed by Lisette Alvarez. This episode was created as a part of the Storyteller Project with Stormfire Productions. Previous experiments include The Wedding Gift and the Seamstress Who Wove the Moon. You can listen to the entire storybuilding process for all the folk tales, from the collective tarot readings that inspired the story, to the hooks and moodboards, to the tones and of course, the final episode on the Tales from the Hearth feed.

This folk tale was created with the support of the community, who raised \$223 dollars for this story over the course of five days. Those extra \$23 – our first surplus so far, woohoo! – will be held in our Storyteller Fund while Stormfire Productions develops its distribution program which will hopefully launch by the end of the year, so stay tuned!

I want to thank everyone who contributed, you have proven that investing in the arts is a worthwhile endeavor. Like Ali, I have been transitioning away from ivory towers and corporate offices over the last year with hope to become a full-time storyteller and to inspire others to create more spaces and connections for these kinds of projects. I am

determined to forge my own path, and this experiment is a key part of that forge. And I know I am not alone.

If you liked what you heard, there are plenty of ways to support Tales from the Hearth and the Storyteller Project and, let's be honest...me, your host and erstwhile person with the many hats in this production shop. Please continue to listen, subscribe, rate, and review. Follow us on social media, or join our email newsletter to get updates there, or come join our weekly creative co-working livestreams on Discord. While you can always donate to the project fund, you can also support Stormfire Productions on Patreon, where we share monthly sigils and exclusive updates on all of our upcoming shows.

Thank you all again for your support, kind words, and as always, for listening.